

NEWSLETTER

News and updates about sage-grouse conservation in Idaho

Fall 2008

Quarterly Update



SAGE-GROUSE ADVISORY COMMITTEE OCTOBER FIELD TRIP

BY WENDY PRATT, EAST IDAHO UPLANDS LWG MEMBER

The rangelands southwest of Twin Falls near the Idaho-Nevada border endured a massive complex of fires in late July 2007. What was previously prime native habitat for sage-grouse, as well as bighorn sheep, deer, elk and bull trout was consumed, in some places to bare ash. The Sage Grouse Statewide Advisory Committee (SAC) attended a tour of the area at its quarterly meeting on October 7. Led by Tom Hemker, SAC Coordinator for the Fish and Game, we visited sites through just a small portion of the acreage burned, which covers nearly 1,000 square miles.

The first stop was a fence marking project where small strips of vinyl house siding are affixed to a temporary fence. The strips, installed by BLM, are very visible and used to alert grouse traveling to and from a nearby lek.

Next we stopped at a successful re-seeding conducted on Idaho state land. We were told that the restoration effort was unprecedented in Idaho and perhaps the nation. Not only was the scale monumental with 99 seed drills operating here from October through January, covering some 69,000 acres, but the inter-agency cooperation was unique as well. Because state land is interspersed throughout federal land, seed drills were run right across land regardless of ownership. Local rancher permit-



Area that was drill seeded with grasses and forbs in fall 2007 after the Murphy Complex Fire.

tees also assisted with their own private drills. Another 281,000 acres were aerial treated with sagebrush seed, covering nearly half of the area damaged. Success is variable in this first season. The area we stopped in showed a diverse array of seedlings including yarrow, mallow, flax, sagebrush, and several native grasses. We also visited a BLM site with less successful results, but it may respond better next spring.

Next we visited the nearby proposed China Mountain Wind Energy Project. Concerns of the tour attendees centered on the effect this project could have, not only specific to this site, but on the larger landscape. With the

recent fire nearby, the stakes increase on this intact habitat. The turbines would be located on mostly BLM lands, but some additionally on private and state. A local rancher, who owns some of the private land, said that change is coming, and this particular type of change is preferable to others that would have more impact.

The tour made "real" the tough issues facing all of us concerned with resource management. The fire, though devastating, is continuing to yield a wide-ranging bank of restoration knowledge, as well as a striking model that multiple agencies and individuals can accomplish much more cooperatively than we ever can alone. The wind project is

The USFWS is expected to completed their status review on sage-grouse in December 2008.

SAC OCTOBER FIELD TRIP, CONTINUED.

representative of similar proposals throughout the west, illustrating the dichotomy that exists between the benefits of clean renewable energy and probable habitat fragmentation. We would learn as the meeting continued, that these double pressures of wildfire and energy development were a timely topic indeed, as they top the US Fish and Wildlife's list of threats to sage grouse conservation.



SAC members viewing and discussing the proposed China Mountain Wind Energy Project.

LOCAL WORKING GROUP UPDATES

BIG DESERT

The Big Desert LWG continues to work on their plan and just finished the livestock grazing section. Their next meeting is October 27 at 6:30 pm at the

Bingham County Senior Citizens Center in Blackfoot. The Big Desert recently had 3 projects approved for funding from the Office of Species

Conservation. One project, sagebrush seedling plantings, is due to start this fall.

There were no reported cases of West Nile virus in sage-grouse in Idaho in 2008.

CHALLIS

The group has not met for several months, since completion of their plan. The next

meeting of the Challis LWG is in December. The Magpie/Larkspur exclosures project is

scheduled to be completed by November 2008.

EAST IDAHO UPLANDS

The East Idaho Uplands group is also working diligently on their conservation plan. They appointed a team to specifi-

cally develop conservation measures to address livestock grazing. Their next meeting is October 14, when

the entire group will meet at Lava Hot Springs.

GREATER CURLEW VALLEY

Two habitat projects on the Curlew National Grassland will get started on-the-ground in the next couple of months. One project involved the col-

lection of locally adapted sagebrush seed, which was then grown at the Lucky Peak Nursery. These seedlings will be planted in the West Strong

Field this fall. In addition, forage kochia will be seeded this winter in strategic strips to provide fuel breaks.

LOCAL WORKING GROUP UPDATES, CONTINUED.

JARBIDGE

The Jarbidge group has a new facilitator, Mike Pepper, and about 10 new members. They have been discussing

ideas for future projects and the need to update their conservation plan, especially because the landscape has

changed with the recent fires, including the Murphy Complex Fire in 2007.

NORTH MAGIC VALLEY

The North Magic Valley LWG is developing their plan. They are currently working on annual grasslands and livestock grazing. One issue of con-

cern for the group continues to be proposed expansion of the Hailey Airport, which could impact key sage-grouse habitat. They also submitted

scoping comments on the Mountain States Intertie transmission line project.

OWYHEE

The Owyhee LWG has been actively reviewing and visiting their past habitat restoration projects (see *Chubby Spain Wildfire Restoration* on the last page of this newsletter). They are excited about their

proposed juniper mastication project, and are nearly ready to take bids for the mastication. The Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation is also involved, because juniper is invading into aspen stands as well as

sagebrush habitats. The LWG is also tracking a project on the Air Force's Saylor Creek Bombing Range, where they will be aerially spraying for cheatgrass.

SHOSHONE BASIN

The Shoshone Basin recently completed their Coordinated Resource Management Plan! To celebrate, the group held a field trip and BBQ in Septem-

ber. They visited some project areas where they are considering some future Dixie Harrow projects. A recent wildfire near Rogerson, how-

ever, is an additional concern, where about 6,000 acres burned, 4,000 of which was on private land.

SOUTH MAGIC VALLEY

The South Magic Valley is the newest Local Working Group. They have had 2 meetings to date. There are currently 2

sage-grouse projects in the planning area. One project is in its 3rd year radio-tracking birds in the Oakley area. The

other project is a fire restoration project on private land, which is due to start this fall.

UPPER SNAKE

The Upper Snake LWG recently provided scoping comments on the Mountain States Intertie transmission project that is being proposed to come from Montana down

through the Upper Snake and Big Desert regions, and towards Twin Falls. Lynn Burtenshaw has been working on concepts for mitigation for projects that disturb or de-

stroy sage-grouse habitat. He presented his ideas to the SAC in October.

WEST CENTRAL

The West Central LWG recently received approval for funding for a Lawson Aerator project on private land. They are planning a scientific approach to the project and will document the vegetation

community before and after. The project will get started this fall. In the meantime, Gene Gray continues to monitor several radio-collared sage-grouse. He reports that 76% of the sage-grouse radio

locations are on private land. He hopes to trap and radio-collar more hens during the lekking season next spring.

2008 Sage-grouse Hunting Season

On opening weekend, 1,341 hunters and 903 sage-grouse were checked at Idaho Fish and Game check stations. In 2007, 1,307 hunters checked 637 birds. Hunting was particularly good in the Upper Snake, where the bag limit was increased to 2 birds. Hunter effort, as measured in hours per bird, was the lowest in the state at 4.8 hours per bird. In contrast, hunters in the Magic Valley needed an average of 9 hours to harvest 1 bird; the season was reduced last year in this region. The numbers of hunters and sage-grouse harvested were similar in the Owyhees compared to previous years. Numbers were difficult to compare in the southeast region, where much of the East Idaho Uplands area was closed and the Curlew Valley reopened for the first time since 2002.

**IDAHO SAGE-GROUSE
ADVISORY COMMITTEE**

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Visit our website!

<http://fishandgame.idaho.gov/cms/hunt/grouse/>

CHUBBY SPAIN WILDFIRE RESTORATION

BY ART TALSMAN, DIRECTOR OF RESTORATION AND STEWARDSHIP, THE NATURE CONSERVANCY

Deer and elk hunters know the importance of seeking out a burned area in their hunting unit. I especially like hunting next to a two-year old burn because all sorts of game are attracted to the new green-up of native plants. So when Dave Torell and I topped the ridge above the Chubby Spain wildfire restoration project we were excited to see two nice bucks at the edge of the fire. Better yet as we turned the corner from Cow Creek road to the Trout Creek road there were sage-grouse up ahead. Not just one or two birds but we watched three big broods cross the road and head toward the fire restoration area. Yes, there were three adult sage hens and 15 young birds all heading into the tall grass and sagebrush!

So why was this Owyhee County sage-grouse project so successful? I think it was because we had great cooperation and responded quickly on the following key components of the restoration project.

- We knew from good IDFG survey data that there were three to four sage-grouse leks near the burned area.
- We responded quickly after

the 6,500 acre Chubby Spain fire with an action plan that was recommended by the Owyhee local working group.

- We ordered a seed mix with native grasses, forbs, and some sage in the mix and directed most of the seeding to lower elevations of the burned area.
- We quickly coordinated the January aerial seeding on both public lands and on the private lands within the burned area.
- We recognized that both the ranch land and the public land in the fire area were in pretty good ecological condition before the fire.
- We knew that the fire ran hot and took out thousands of junipers that were encroaching the good sage steppe habitat.
- We worked close with the Jordan Valley Coordinated Weed Management Area (CWMA) and treated any weeds we found along the fire control lines, cattle guards, and corrals.
- We followed up with both monitoring trips and field tours of the restoration area so ranchers and all partners in conservation could view the positive response in native vegetation.

Dennis Stanford, chairman of



Owyhee LWG and Jordan Valley CWMA members viewing the Chubby Spain Wildfire Restoration.



Sagebrush seed being flown on by a helicopter with attached seed hopper.

the CWMA, said "wow, the grass is knee high everywhere." Art Talsma observed that the western yarrow was especially abundant, providing excellent nesting cover and brood rearing habitat for grouse and all kinds of birds. Donna Bennett noted how few weeds there were in the restoration area. Jim Desmond and Jimmy the rancher agreed that the seeding sure seemed to help and this was great for both wildlife and cattle ranching. One young rancher asked "how can we take out more of these junipers and follow it with good seeding and weed control on private lands?" He was invited to the next local weed meeting and is now playing an active part on the coordinated weed management area to improve his rangelands.

If you have any ideas for the next newsletter, please contact Ann Moser at 208-287-2705 or amoser@idfg.idaho.gov